

Mother in Law by theamiableanachronism

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Summary: Just a little drabble in which El has a nagging question.

Mother in Law

"What's a 'mother-in-law'?"

He'd just come through the door, an apology on his lips for being late again, this time in the form of a telephone call from Eleanor Gillespie going into hysterics over distinctly owl-like noises coming from her attic. But he didn't have a chance to explain when El fired off her question before the door had even closed behind him.

"A what?"

"A 'mother-in-law'." He looked at her, leaning against the back of the couch, her knees digging into the cushions so she could face him directly. In her hands was a copy of TV Guide. He hung his coat by the door and dropped his hat on the table.

"A mother-in-law?" He strolled around the end of the couch and lowered himself onto the corner cushion, El sliding down to sit cross-legged next to him. He draped an arm across the back of the couch and looked into her worried face. He'd picked up on the urgency in her voice the moment he'd come through the door; this was bothering her. Why this word in particular, he had no idea, but it wasn't her weirdest question. Six months had taught him that much. He looked over her shoulder and noticed her dictionary tilted against the arm of the couch as if it had been tossed there in frustration. She'd tried. He looked back to El, whose head was bowed over the TV Guide, perusing a particular passage with a word marked prominently in red pencil.

"What you asking about that for?"

El raised her head, her lips pursed over the as-yet-unspoken words she'd probably been holding in all day.

"Devious." She said it quietly, as if unsure how to pronounce it.

"Devious?"

She plopped the magazine in his lap and read aloud, her finger

drawing an invisible line under each painstakingly pronounced word:

"Constance Brewhurst, Tim's devious mother-in-law, arrives on the day of the engagement party bearing a secret that could change Tim's and Sophia's lives forever..." She stopped and pointed back to the word circled in red. "Devious," she said again, looking up at him expectantly.

He paused, looking from her to the page and back again. "You want to know what it means?"

She shook her head, curls bouncing in irritation. "No. I know what it means."

"Well then what? I thought you were asking about a mother-in-law."

She nodded. "What is it?"

"It's the husband's mother. You know husband, right?" El nodded again impatiently. "Okay. So what's all this about devious?"

She paused. "Are... all mother-in-laws devious?"

He drew a hand across his mouth, stalling for time. He knew the answer was no. He just didn't have any evidence to back it up. Not from personal experience, at least. HIS mother-in-law had been the one who set him and Hannah up on their first blind date, something they didn't know until Sarah's second birthday. He didn't know if it got any more devious than that. But that wouldn't help El any; she was looking more worried the longer he hesitated and he almost laughed. She was thirteen— mother-in-laws were something she wouldn't have to worry about for at least ten more years. Give or take twenty.

He coughed. "I don't know, El, I don't think so, I mean, why would they be?"

He knew it was a cop-out answer, could see the dissatisfaction on her face, the disappointment in her eyes, but how was he supposed to know who her mother-in-law was going to be-

Oh.

He squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed his thick skull with a sigh, memories of impromptu midnight discussions about love suddenly flooding in on him, discussions that hadn't made sense until they slowly but surely turned into questions about a certain teenager living on Maple Street, questions that he'd forgotten about until now.

He sighed again, if only to cover the urge to laugh at the serious expression on El's face, the girl who'd survived an Indiana winter alone, the girl who'd sacrificed herself to destroy monsters that still haunted her dreams, the girl who'd walked through literal shadow dimensions to find a missing kid, the girl who'd been locked up in a lab so long she woke up in the middle of the night terrified she'd never left.

And she was worried that Mike Wheeler's mother would turn out to be a devious mother-in-law like in the soap operas.

He let out a low chuckle. "Aw hell kid." He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Kid, you've got nothing to worry about, all right?" He looked down at the mop of curls resting sullenly against his chest. "Hey. Look at me." He smiled ruefully into her unconvinced brown eyes. "Look... not all mother-in-laws are...are devious. Mine... wasn't. People are just gonna be people. Some are gonna be... devious, but most won't be. All right?" She'd looked away again so he squeezed her shoulder, playfully jostling her until he caught the edges of a smile creeping up her face. "All right?" he repeated.

"All right," she finally said.

He rubbed his eyes. "You're really something else kid, you know that?" She looked up and nodded, a knowing grin on her face. He ruffled her hair and got up from the couch, resolving to check in on Mike tomorrow.

And to pick up some rentals to leave El during the day from now on.